A Brief Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics and Erhu Playing Techniques of the "Erhu Piece Spring Dawn in Gusu" by Deng Jiandong

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Abstract

"Spring Dawn in Gusu" is an Erhu piece composed and performed by the renowned Erhu performer Deng Jiandong, and it is characterized by a strong Jiangnan musical style. This paper first introduces Deng Jiandong's musical learning experience and its influence on the composition of "Spring Dawn in Gusu". It then analyzes the musical style of the piece: the work embodies the Jiangnan Sizhu style, adopts the pentatonic scale, and draws on the formal structure of complete sets of vocal patterns in traditional opera music, including Sanban, Yuanban, Zhongban, and Kuaiban (1/4 meter), which gives the piece a dramatic character, depicts a vivid picture of spring in full bloom in the city of Gusu, and highlights the distinctive charm of Jiangnan music, in which undulation is found within gentleness and change is concealed within delicacy. Finally, this paper examines the left- and right-hand Erhu playing techniques, such as supported-finger glissando, vibrato, grace notes, and position shifting, and, in combination with the author's own performance experience, seeks a reasonable interpretation of the music.

Keywords

"Spring Dawn in Gusu"; Deng Jiandong; Erhu Playing Techniques.

1. Introduction

The Erhu originated in the Tang Dynasty, when it was called the "Xiqin", and it has a history of more than one thousand years up to the present day (see Figure 1). Over the course of its development, numerous schools have emerged, among which "Jiangnan Erhu" has been transmitted for a relatively long time and embodies a gentle, delicate, refined, and soft artistic style [1]. "Spring Dawn in Gusu", an Erhu work composed by Deng Jiandong, is one of the representative pieces of Jiangnan Erhu. It is characterized by delicacy and suppleness, as well as implicit and graceful beauty.



Figure 1. Erhu

This paper first examines the Jiangnan Sizhu style of the piece, analyzes its formal structure, and refines the left- and right-hand techniques, with the aim of providing an accurate interpretation of this work.

2. Introduction to the Composer and the Work "Spring Dawn in Gusu"

"Spring Dawn in Gusu" was composed by Deng Jiandong in 1985 [2]. Deng Jiandong, a native of Wuxi, Jiangsu, is a renowned contemporary Erhu performer and educator in China. He studied at the Jiangsu Opera School and worked for the Jiangsu Xiju Opera Troupe, and he grew up immersed in these Jiangnan folk music and cultural traditions [3]. With a profound understanding of the tonal language of Jiangnan Sizhu music and operatic music, as well as their compositional and performance approaches, he thereby established the fundamental style and musical subject matter for the composition of "Spring Dawn in Gusu". Based on the Jiangnan Sizhu style, this work also incorporates performance approaches from Western instruments and Chinese local opera. The piece depicts the natural scenery of early spring in the city of Gusu; it is cheerful and melodious, sweet and lyrical, making one feel as if one were in the winding, bright and tranquil, exquisitely delicate and graceful gardens of Gusu. It is like the joyful singing of hundreds of birds, leaving one reluctant to depart, and it presents a beautiful scene of spring in full bloom in a veritable earthly paradise.

3. Artistic Characteristics of the Erhu Piece "Spring Dawn in Gusu"

"Spring Dawn in Gusu" not only condenses the essence of Jiangnan regional culture, but also carries out a creatively rich artistic expression based on the traditional musical lexicon. Using the sounds of Sizhu as brushstrokes, the piece vividly delineates the spring-filled scenery and vigorous vitality of the ancient city of Gusu. At the same time, its compositional methods and performance techniques also profoundly embody the aesthetic pursuit of "fixed notation, living performance" in Jiangnan Sizhu and the deep influence of operatic music [4]. This chapter will conduct an in-depth analysis of its artistic characteristics from the perspectives of the distinctive style of Jiangnan Sizhu and the compositional features of the piece, as well as at the level of formal structure.

3.1. Characteristics of the Musical Composition

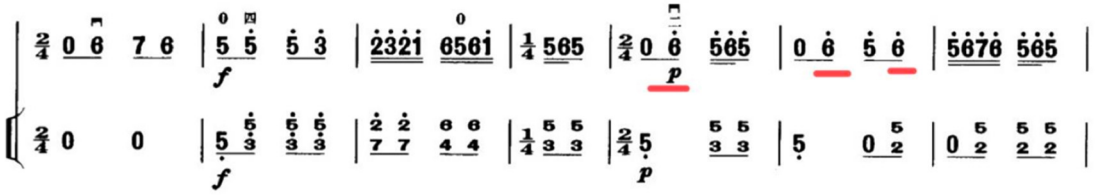
"Spring Dawn in Gusu" depicts the natural scenery of Gusu City in early spring, and at the same time conveys praise for and love of the composer's hometown. It is a highly figurative work in the style of Jiangnan Sizhu. Jiangnan Sizhu music is a form of folk silk-and-bamboo ensemble music popular in the Yangtze River Delta region. It has been developed through the processes of collection, reference, and organization by musicians of successive generations within a specific humanistic and regional cultural environment. "Silk" refers to instruments with silk strings, such as the Erhu and Gaohu, while "bamboo" refers to instruments made of bamboo, such as the Dizi and Xiao. The combination of these two categories of instruments in performance forms silk-and-bamboo music [5]. It is based on extremely simple and pleasant melodies, and several "ornamental tones" are added to the melodic "principal tones" or "secondary tones". These "ornamental tones" are called "interpolated ornamental tones". During performance, musicians use various decorative techniques to embellish the melodic tones, which is referred to as "fixed notation, living performance" [6].

The piece mainly adopts the pentatonic scale, namely Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu. It is simple and unadorned yet rich in charm, corresponding to the fresh and elegant temperament of the Jiangnan water towns. In different sections of the piece, however, the mode undergoes changes. For example, in the Adagio section, a relatively soft Yu mode is adopted, emphasizing the gentle and graceful beauty of Jiangnan music. In the Allegro section, the mode shifts to a

brighter Zhi mode. The rich and varied modal changes enable listeners to perceive different musical emotions and enhance the expressive power of the piece.

In addition, this work draws on the formal structure of complete sets of vocal patterns in traditional opera music, including Sanban, Yuanban (one beat with three sub-beats, 4/4 meter), Zhongban (one beat with one sub-beat, 2/4 meter), and Kuaiban (1/4 meter) [2]. The bowing techniques are largely derived from opera music, especially cross-beat slurred bowing and cross-measure slurred bowing. Elements of Peking Opera Qupai are incorporated into the Allegro section; for example, in Musical Example 1, the ornamental tone "7" is added before "6". The piece begins on a weak beat, employs syncopated rhythms, and allows the "principal tones" to run through the entire work in varied forms.

3.2. Analysis of Formal Structure



Musical Example 1. Introduction

"Spring Dawn in Gusu" is composed in a four-section form with an introduction and a Coda. The structural diagram is shown as follows (Table 1):

Table 1. Formal Structure of "Spring Dawn in Gusu"

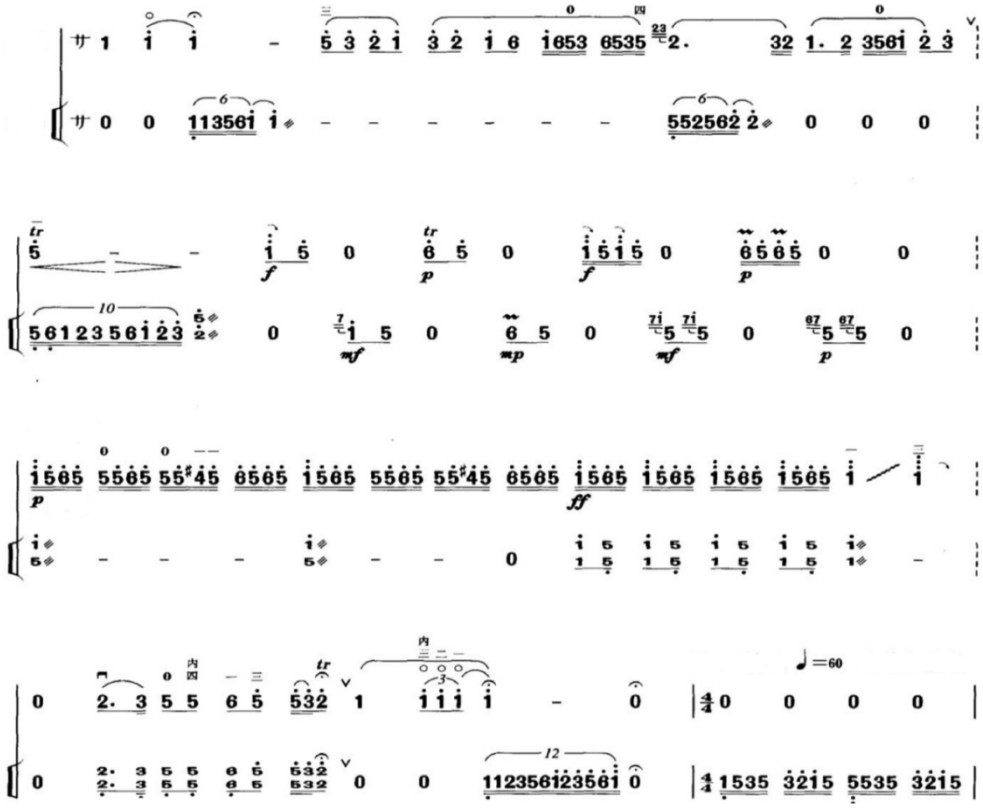
	Introduction	First Section	Second Section	Third Section	Fourth Section	Coda
Tempo	Free tempo	Adagio	Andantino	Allegro	Allegro	
Measures	1-4	5-28	29-75	76-126	127-158	159-221
Mode	D Gong mode system — G Gong mode system — D Gong mode system					

This piece consists of five sections: Introduction, Adagio, Andantino, Allegro, Recapitulation, and Coda.

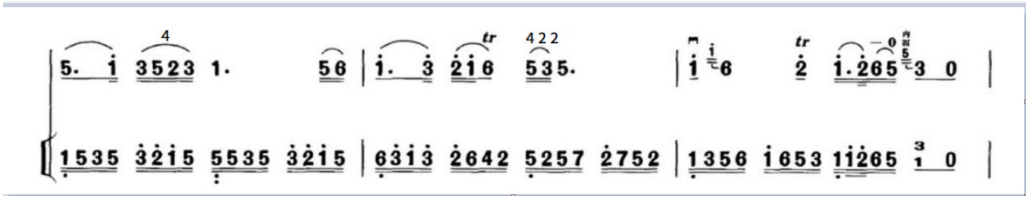
The Introduction is in free tempo, and the mode is the traditional Chinese D Gong mode. In Measure 1 (see Musical Example 2, Measure 1), an octave leap is used; then the pitch descends from high to low, and the rhythm changes from slow to fast, depicting a beautiful scene of Gusu at dawn. In Measures 2 and 3 (see Musical Example 1, Measures 2 and 3), the "principal tones" "do" and "sol" are combined with harmonics, glissando, and grace notes to imitate birdsong. The dynamic levels of the Erhu and the Yangqin respond to each other, forming a call-and-response pattern. The tempo gradually accelerates, and the note values change from eighth notes to sixteenth notes. In Measure 4 (see Musical Example 1, Measure 4), the characteristic seventh leap "6"-"5" of Jiangnan music is employed. Finally, the "rolling finger" harmonic ends on the tonic, establishing the basic thematic character of the entire piece.

The first section is in 4/4 meter, with an Adagio tempo and in the D Gong mode. It is divided into three phrases: a, b, and a', with phrases a and a' sharing the same opening but differing at the ending. In Measure 6 (see Musical Example 3, Measure 1), the thematic motive of the whole piece is introduced, creating a gently unfolding, narrative character and expressing the soft and graceful qualities of Jiangnan music. The Erhu carries a long, lyrical melodic line, while the Yangqin plays sixteenth notes to "fill in" the melodic part. In the Erhu performance,

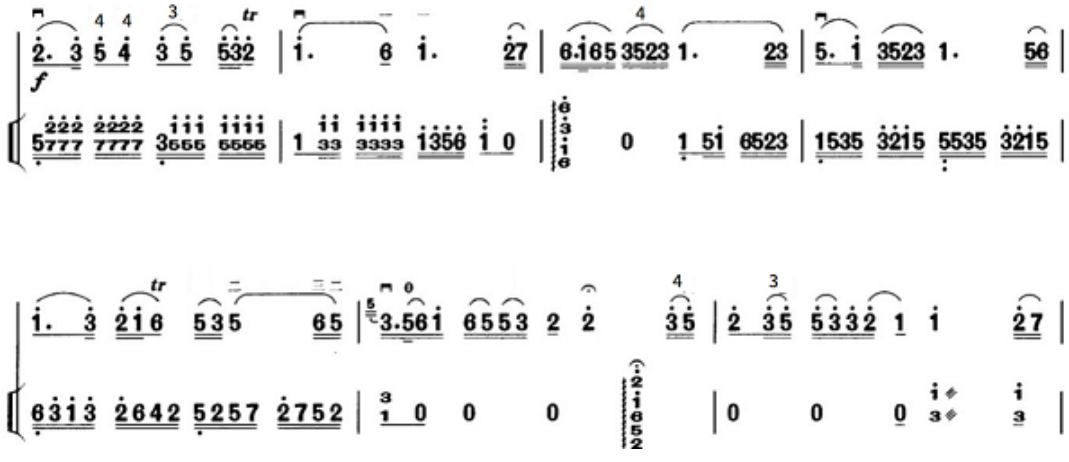
characteristic techniques such as finger-slide ornaments, grace notes, and vibrato are applied. In Measure 25 (see Musical Example 4, Measure 4), the theme returns. In Measure 28 (see Musical Example 4, Measure 7), the tonic gradually increases in dynamic intensity from soft to strong, and a syncopated octave leap leads into the Andantino.



Musical Example 2. Octave Leap

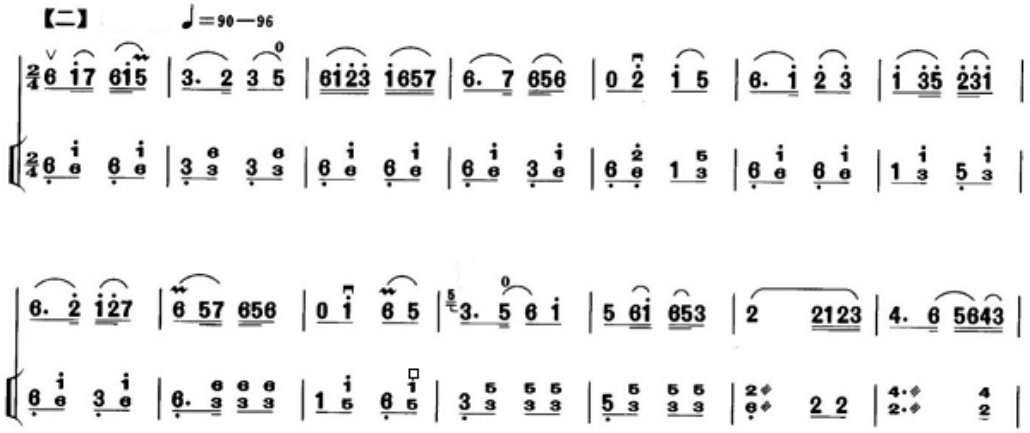


Musical Example 3. First Section

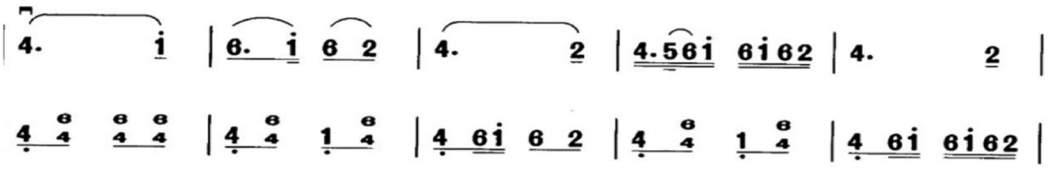


Musical Example 4. First Section

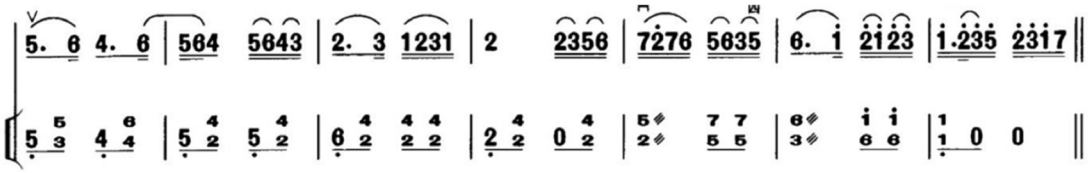
The second section is an Andantino with a typical Jiangnan Sizhu style, light and lively, in 2/4 meter. In Measure 29 (see Musical Example 5, Measure 1), it begins with a pushing bow stroke. The Yangqin accompaniment mainly uses eighth notes, and the main melodic line of the Erhu often begins on the second half of the beat. Through repetition and variation of rhythmic motives, the music is propelled forward, as in Measures 33-41 (see Musical Example 5, Measures 5-13). In Measure 64 (see Musical Example 6, Measure 1), the mode shifts from the D Gong mode to the G Gong mode, and the introduction of dotted rhythms broadens the rhythmic values, making the musical flow more fluid. The bowing techniques employ typical cross-beat slurred bowing and cross-measure slurred bowing from opera music, for example in Measures 11 and 14 of Musical Example 4. In Measure 75 (see Musical Example 7, Measure 7), the tempo gradually slows down and finally rests on the leading tone of the D Gong mode, preparing for the entry of the Allegro.



Musical Example 5. Second Section



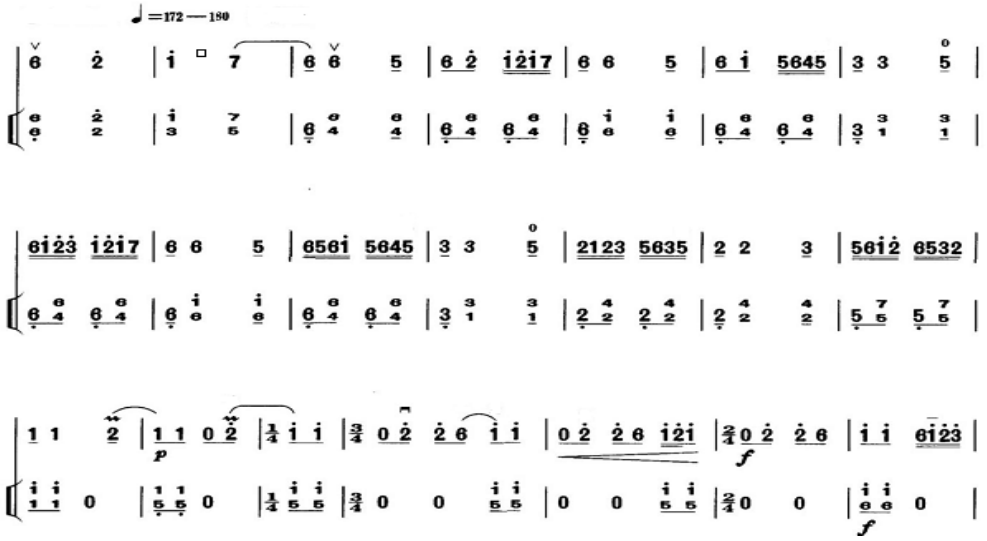
Musical Example 6. Second Section



Musical Example 7. Second Section

The third section is a passionate Allegro in 2/4 meter. In Measures 76-77 (see Musical Example 8, Measures 1-2), the four quarter notes should be full, firm, and elastic. Measure 78 (see Musical Example 8, Measure 3) shifts suddenly from slow to fast, after which the tempo becomes a lively Allegro. The rhythmic and metric changes are active and frequent: for example, Measures 78-90 (see Musical Example 8, Measures 3-15) make extensive use of syncopated rhythms; Measures 91-96 (see Musical Example 8, Measures 16-21) alternate among 1/4, 2/4, and 3/4 meters; Measures 101-118 (see Musical Example 9, Measures 4-19) begin on weak beats; and Measures 119-124 (see Musical Example 9, Measures 23-27) use a rapid series of sixteenth-note arpeggios to push the music toward a climax. These

compositional techniques provide a powerful and inexhaustible driving force for the musical development.

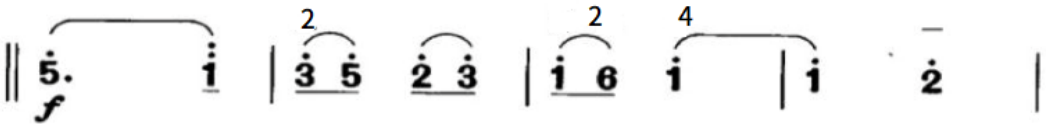


Musical Example 8. Third Section

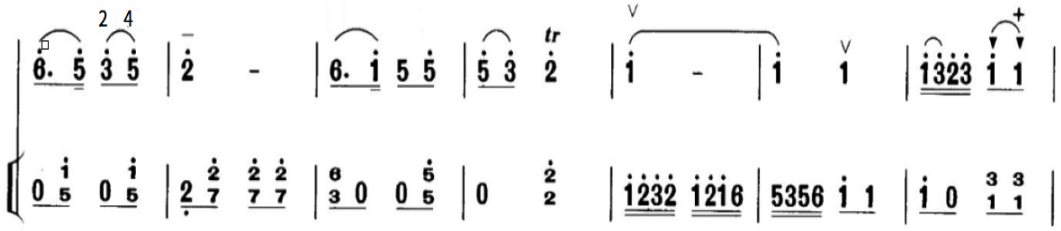


Musical Example 9. Third Section

The fourth section, in 2/4 meter, is the climactic section of the piece and presents a recapitulation of the theme. In Measures 127-130 (see Musical Example 10, Measures 1-4), the theme is raised by one octave and undergoes "ornamented variation", and the rhythmic values are doubled compared with earlier sections. The musical emotion becomes intense and exalted, expressing praise for the splendid rivers and mountains of Jiangnan. Measures 156-158 conclude with a full cadence on the tonic of the D Gong mode.



Musical Example 10. Fourth Section



Musical Example 11. Fourth Section

The Coda supplements the climactic section. In Measures 186-195 (see Musical Example 12, Measures 1-10), the "birdsong" from the Introduction is restated. Through pizzicato, glissando, abrupt changes of register, and contrasts of dynamics, a scene of birds singing in competition is depicted. The Coda proceeds through successive intensifications, and in Measures 212-214 (see Musical Example 13, Measures 3-5), three groups of septuplets push the emotional intensity to its peak. Finally, the music rests on the dominant-tonic progression and ends amid the enthusiastic "chorus" of a hundred birds.



Musical Example 12. Coda



Musical Example 13. Septuplets

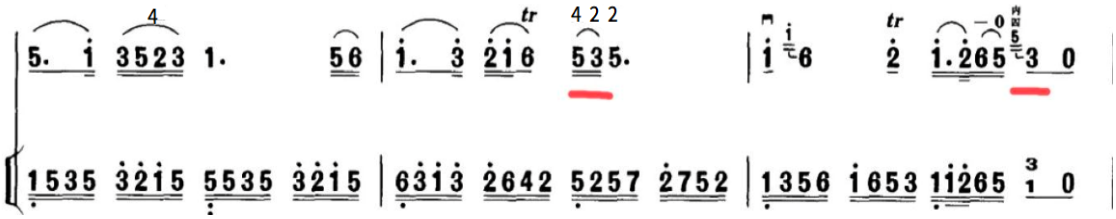
4. Erhu Playing Techniques in "Spring Dawn in Gusu"

4.1. Left Hand

Left-hand ornamental techniques are the key to expressing the style of Jiangnan Sizhu music. The prerequisite for achieving effective ornamental techniques is that the body must be relaxed, the purpose being to deliver oxygen to every part of the body, so that the fingers can maintain flexibility under conditions without oxygen deficiency.

4.1.1. Supported-Finger Glissando

Supported-finger glissando (Dianzhi Huayin) is the most typical playing technique in Jiangnan-style Erhu works. It utilizes a combination of fingerings, using one or two fingers as an intermediary to slide the little finger upward or downward, and during the sliding process a small amount of "string pressing" is added [7]. For example, in Measures 7-8 (see Musical Examples 2 and 3), a sol-mi minor-third supported-finger glissando is used: the second finger remains pressed on the string while the fourth finger slides upward. In performance, it should be neither too slow nor too fast, but executed with precision and restraint; particular attention should be paid to the process, with careful control of speed and pressure. The ornamentation of the glissando gives the music a quality similar to the Suzhou dialect words "soft" and "glutinous". To express this characteristic, the use of supported-finger glissando is especially important.

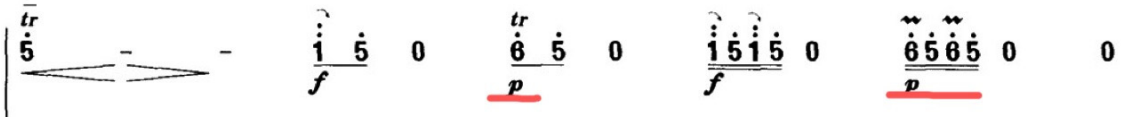


Musical Example 14. Supported-Finger Glissando

4.1.2. Vibrato

Appropriate use of vibrato is also an important means of expressing the Jiangnan style in Erhu works. There are three main types of vibrato: rolling vibrato, pressure vibrato, and sliding vibrato. This piece mainly employs rolling vibrato [8]. In the Adagio section, the vibrato speed is slightly slower and gentler. Some notes of relatively long duration use "slow vibrato", in which the vibrato speed gradually increases from slow to fast, and in the endings of some sections there is vibrato that changes from fast to slow. In the Allegro or more passionate passages, the vibrato pressure is slightly increased, and the speed is slightly faster. Simple pressure vibrato or rolling vibrato alone can no longer satisfy the expression of the musical emotion; therefore, the combination of rolling vibrato and pressure vibrato is more capable of conveying the graceful scenery of the Jiangnan water towns.

4.1.3. Grace Notes



Musical Example 15. Grace Notes

In Jiangnan-style Erhu works, grace notes are also an extremely important playing technique. The finger used for a grace note should strike the string directly and be lifted quickly. When executing grace notes, they should not be too long, too slow, or too heavy, to conform to the gentle beauty of Jiangnan music. For example, in Measure 2 (see Musical Example 15), the grace notes imitating birdsong should be crisp and bright. There are also grace notes in

special positions; for instance, in Measure 4 (see Musical Example 16), the “2” should be played as a grace note on an up-bow.



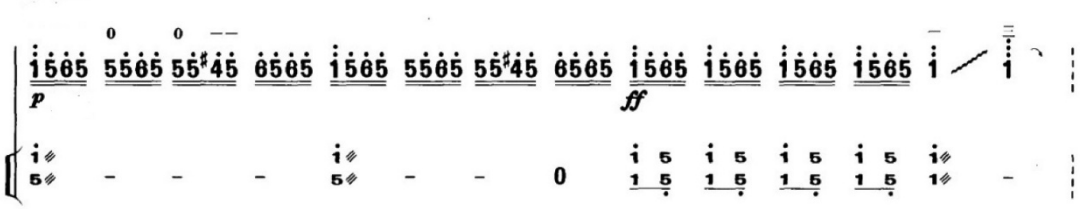
Musical Example 16. Grace Notes

4.1.4. Positions

In performance, position shifting is also a technique that must not be neglected. One must have a clear awareness of positions. During movement, the stability of the palm should be controlled, and the entire hand should move up and down following the web between the thumb and index finger. When shifting positions, the thumb-index web should remain relaxed, with moderate pressure. The intervallic relationships and the finger spacing in each register should be clearly perceived. The string should be touched only after the hand has reached the position. Attention should also be paid to the coordination among the arm, wrist, thumb-index web, and fingers, and the hand shape should be maintained.

4.2. Right Hand

In Erhu playing techniques, the force, speed, and length of bowing determine the timbre and regional style of the music. During both down-bow and up-bow, the breath should be smooth and continuous, driving the movement of the body. In addition to left-hand techniques such as glissando and vibrato, right-hand bowing treatment is also an important means of expressing the Jiangnan style in Erhu works. In the Introduction, the initial bow stroke should be steady, gradual, and clean; the sound should be soft but not weak. In Measure 3 (see Musical Example 17), the sixteenth notes gradually change from slow to fast, the bow length gradually increases, and the bow pressure also gradually increases. In the Adagio of the first section, the right-hand bowing should be lengthened, and full bows should be used more often, making the melodic line more gentle and graceful. In the Andantino, the music is light and agile, and the rhythmic motion of the melody changes accordingly; there are many rests, and one must ensure that “the sound stops but the breath does not stop”, allowing the breath to run through the entire passage. In the Allegro, the accented bow strokes on syncopated notes must be full and solid. When the “birdsong” material from the Introduction reappears, the strength of both the left and right hands is increased. Rapid string crossing is one of the most difficult techniques to master in right-hand bowing. In performance, the bowing should be elastic, while maintaining bow pressure and speed, and timbral consistency should be preserved when changing bows. The traces of string crossing should be minimized as much as possible to avoid timbral inconsistency and the production of blurred or unclear sounds.



Musical Example 17. Bowing Treatment

5. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the artistic characteristics and performance techniques of "Spring Dawn in Gusu". In performing this piece, theory should be combined with practical performance, and the cultural background of the composition should be understood, so that the emotional tone of the work can be fully comprehended. The performer should coordinate the movements of the whole body, address technical difficulties in basic skills such as vibrato, position shifting, and grace notes one by one, and pay attention to every single note without losing the overall melodic beauty of the large-scale melodic line. In this way, the Erhu can be used to express this work with greater precision.

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